

Tribe supports appropriate use of Native mascots

Council members testify before state Legislature as issue is revived

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

The issue of Oregon public schools using Tribal mascots continues to have life and the Grand Ronde Tribe is getting involved in the continuing debate.

On Thursday, March 27, Grand Ronde Tribal Chairman Reyn Leno and Tribal Council member Kathleen Tom testified before the Senate Education and Workforce Development Committee regarding Senate Bill 215, which seeks to prohibit the state Board of Education from adopting rules or imposing sanctions related to the use of any mascots by public schools.

The bill is sponsored by Republican Sen. Jeff Kruse of Roseburg, where the high school mascot is the Indians.

"Rather than some state board dictating to all the communities and all the Tribes, what this bill does is allow the local Tribe and local community to work out their issues, and come to an agreement," Kruse said.

In 2012, the Board of Education ruled that Oregon public schools using Tribal mascots had to stop using them and threatened to withhold funding and impose sanctions if they did not change their mascots.

According to the Oregon Department of Education, 15 high schools in the state use Native mascots.

The Grand Ronde Tribe, however, has consistently pushed for a solution that has the nine federally recognized Tribes in the state working with their local school districts to resolve the use of Tribal mascots.

The Grand Ronde Tribe also took umbrage at the Board of Education's sweeping mandate, arguing that it infringes on Tribal sovereignty.

"As a sovereign nation," Leno said in support of the Senate bill, "the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has worked diligently to build positive government-to-government relationships across all levels of government. We have to do so on federal, state and local levels, including with our local school districts.

"High school mascots are supposed to be inspirational. High schools do not adopt 'losers' or 'slugs' as their mascots; they adopt admirable and inspirational figures. The banned names – Indians, Braves, Warriors and Chiefs – are inspirational Native images and we do not view their use as de facto derogatory.

"The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, along with other Oregon Tribes, prefer a solution that would allow schools to keep their Na-



Photos by Dean Rhodes

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno is interviewed by KGW-TV reporter Katherine Cook in front of the State Capitol on Wednesday, April 3, regarding use of Native mascots by Oregon public schools. Leno was prominently featured in that evening's newscast on Channel 8 in Portland.



Kathleen Tom

tive mascots if they collaborate with a representative Tribe on positive portrayals or integrated cultural studies to combat stereotypes.

"That being said, we are more disturbed by the state Board of Education's disregard for our sovereignty."

Tom echoed Leno's testimony, saying that the state Board of Education "should not implement a one-size-fits-all solution that impacts the nine individual sovereign Tribal governments here in Oregon."

"We believe that this is an issue that is best resolved with efforts from the Tribal government and their local communities," Tom said. "We have worked with our own local school districts to make sure they accurately and respectfully portray Native culture. We have been able to deal with these situations at the local level, with respect and sensitivity to our Tribal students, all students, our Tribal citizens and all citizens within our shared communities."

Both Leno and Tom then segued into another issue – getting an Indian education specialist position in the state Department of Education.

"We are more disturbed," Leno said, "by their consistent foot-dragging regarding one of our constant requests – to end racism against Oregon's Native people and mandate that schools in Oregon teach our history."

"The Grand Ronde Tribe has a long-standing request in to the state Department of Education to fund an Indian education specialist, as well as mandate that all

Oregon schools teach Oregon Tribal history. We are encouraged this legislative session that this might finally get done.

"There are nine federally recognized Tribes in Oregon. The history of our peoples who have lived in Oregon since time immemorial covers the breadth of the state, and is either ignored or briefly mentioned in our schools. Most Oregon students learn more about the Sioux and Apaches than they do about the Umpqua, Molalla, Rogue River, Kalapuya or Chasta.

"Why are our children going to school and teaching their teachers about our history?"

Leno said that teaching Oregonians about Oregon Tribal history would make more of a difference than a Native mascot ban.

"Rather than handing down an unfunded mandate on mascots, if the state Board of Education truly wants to take a giant step toward reduction or elimination of racism toward Oregon's Native peoples, then put us in your history books – fund an Indian education specialist and mandate that schools teach the history of the peoples who have lived on this land long before

explorers, fur traders and settlers started arriving in the early 1800s," Leno said.

"The history of Oregon did not start with the arrival of Lewis and Clark. It was occurring for thousands of years before they set foot on our land, and many of those Indians, braves, warriors and chiefs are worthy of being honored as high school mascots.

"If more Oregonians were educated about Tribal history, society and culture, it would do much more to solve the problems attributed to Indian mascots than simply outlawing the practice."

"The key to our relationships," Tom said, "with all levels of government in the future is through education outreach. We would suggest to the state Board of Education that we move past this issue and on to something that truly could make a difference for the benefit of Tribes and Oregonians alike. Let's take a strong look at teaching all of Oregon's students about the history and culture of Oregon's nine unique sovereign governments."

Senate Bill 215, which was approved by the entire Senate on Wednesday, April 10, in a 24-4 vote, is essentially the same as House Bill 3397, which received a public hearing before the House Education Committee on Wednesday, April 3.

Leno and Tribal Council member Cheryle A. Kennedy testified at that hearing, as well.

On Tuesday, April 2, Tribal Council voted 6-0 to adopt a resolution supporting both Senate Bill 215 and House Bill 3397.

"The Tribe supports allowing schools to keep their Native mascots if they collaborate with a representative Tribe on positive portrayals or integrated cultural studies to combat stereotypes," the resolution said.

In addition, the resolution requested the Department of Education fund an Indian education specialist and mandate that all Oregon schools teach Tribal history and culture. ■



Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno testifies before the House Education Committee on Wednesday, April 3, regarding use of Native mascots by Oregon public schools. Leno said that the Grand Ronde Tribe supports appropriate use of Native mascots and dialogue between school districts and the closest Native Tribe to resolve any issues that arise from use of Native mascots. He said the Tribe does not support a statewide mandate from the state Board of Education that violates Tribal sovereignty. Tribal Council member Cheryle A. Kennedy and Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin listen as Leno testifies. Kennedy also testified before the committee.

Elders' phone numbers wanted

The Tribal Elders Committee is working on a volunteer phone list of Elders. If you would like to submit your phone number and address to be available to other Elders, send it to elders.committee@grandronde.org or leave a message at 503-879-2231. ■